

Transcript
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Movie Theater Access Agreements

Participants:

- Attorney General Martha Coakley
- John Abbott, President and CEO of WGBH
- Commissioner Jane LaBreck of the Massachusetts Commission for the Blind (MCB)
- Commissioner Heidi Reed of the Massachusetts Commission for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing (MCDHH)
- Kim Charlson, Director of the Braille & Talking Book Library at the Perkins School for the Blind
- Larry Goldberg, Director of Media Access at WGBH

John Abbott, President and CEO of WGBH: Good afternoon everyone, we're thrilled to have you here at WGBH. I'm John Abbot, President from WGBH and it is our pleasure, all of my colleagues here, to welcome you here today. We're very pleased to host this event on behalf of Attorney General Martha Coakley and her guests, Commissioner Janet LaBreck of the Massachusetts Commission for the Blind, Commissioner Heidi Reed of the Massachusetts Commission for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing, and Kim Charlson Director of the Perkins Brail and Talking Book Library at the Perkins School for the Blind, right nearby accomplishing great things.

As some of you may know, WGBH has a long history of leadership in providing access to media to underserved audiences, stretching back to 1972, WGBH pioneered captioning for television for the first time allowing deaf and hard of hearing viewers to enjoy television alongside all of their neighbors. And in 1990 we launched the descriptive video service providing audio description of television programs as a service to blind and low vision viewers. Our commitment has not been limited to our broadcast programs however, through our national center for accessible media we have continued to develop and advance access for both existing and emerging technologies from the web to new mobile devices.

One of WGBH's major efforts was to adapt our access technology to movie theaters, which is why we are gathered in this theater today for some very exciting news that we've waited for, for some time, and I can't tell you how excited we are to hear. So let me turn now to our Attorney General Martha Coakley to share her announcement with us. Thank you for being with us.

Attorney General Martha Coakley: Thank you very much, and thanks John, and thanks to WGBH, to Larry Goldberg who you are going to hear from shortly. I want to thank and I know you're going to hear from folks, but I particularly want to thank Heidi Reed, Janet LaBreck, and Kim Charlson, not only for what you are doing for us today with our

announcement, but for the terrific work that you do every day. I want to thank also, who are with me on the podium today, Maura Healey, who is the Division Chief of our Civil Rights Division, and Assistant Attorney General Adam Hollingsworth, who is here with us today. I also want to thank the leaders and members of several disability advocacy groups including, the Disability and Policy Consortium, the National Federation of the Blind, Bay State Council of the Blind, the Disability Law Center, the Carol Center for the Blind, Deaf Incorporated, and independent living centers from across the state.

We are very pleased and excited to be here with you today, and in a week in which we are celebrating the 20th anniversary of the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act, it's entirely appropriate that we are here today to announce that we have reached an agreement that will take another step, in fact a large step, in assuring access and independence for all of our citizens.

There are approximately 545,000 deaf and hard of hearing as well as 35,000 legally individuals in Massachusetts. Our investigation revealed that big three movie; AMC, Regal, and National Amusements, that cover about 60 percent of the markets in Massachusetts, had a total of 423 auditoriums of which only 14, or three percent were equipped with accessibility technology for the blind and deaf.

We entered into our discussions with these companies, working to ensure three basic principles for hearing and visually disabled. We wanted meaningful access, we wanted independence and inclusion, and we believe that we have accomplished that with this agreement.

The agreement that we announce today ensures that 100 percent of these locations, of the large chains, will be accessible in at least one auditorium. That makes the total number of accessible auditoriums an increase from 14 to 63, which is a 450 percent increase, and with this agreement, blind and deaf individuals, for the first time, will have a choice of accessible movie options at large theaters, 10 or more screens, and will require to have two accessible auditoriums resulting in a choice of accessible movies now at 27 locations instead of zero locations today. We are going to show you a demonstration shortly with the help of Larry Goldberg, but I want to mention exactly what this is going to do.

First, for deaf individuals, the technology that will now be available will permit deaf individuals to comprehend the auditory components of a film. Currently we have open captioning and Rear Window captioning, which you will see shortly. Open captions, obviously include subtitles for every film where the auditory components of a film such as the conversation, the background noise, the music, they are all displayed along the bottom of the screen for every patron to see. Rear Window captioning, consists of a small screen, which is affixed at the rear of a theater, if you look behind you, you can see that, that is displaying the captioning transcript of the movie. The patron receives a clear reflective panel that fits into the cup holder, and some of you can see that you are looking at those now. That will allow the individual to see the subtitles that are reflected from the back, up on to the screen, running along the bottom of the movie and will allow them to have captions that will not interfere with the movie experience of anybody else that is in the theater.

The rear captioning technology has been installed in a number of theaters nationwide and now in Massachusetts. Now, for blind individuals, the DVS or Descriptive Video Service, is a system designed by WGBH that includes a set of headphones, it's worn by a patron with poor vision which enables that person to hear an oral narration of the visual elements of the film. DVS has been met with widespread approval by those in the blind community and makes a huge in the quality of the movie going experience for the blind.

Now movies are, as we know, an important part of our cultural, social, and entertainment landscape. For years, the technology has existed that dramatically enables blind and deaf to have meaningful access to the latest first-run movies that are enjoyed by the non-disabled. Unfortunately that technology was not utilized in many of the movie theaters here in Massachusetts. We investigated the issue, we met with numerous blind and deaf residents, we met with a number of people during our investigation and they shared their stories with us, which was an important part of our zeal to accomplish this agreement today. For instance, we heard from a deaf individual, a movie fan, who said she often has to drive an hour, sometimes as far as New York, to see accessible movies, even though they were being shown in a local theater. And she noted that the lack of accessible theaters is difficult for deaf parents, because they cannot share the experience by taking their children to a movie, because they don't understand the dialogue.

The technology and the agreement today is an example of how we can, and should, and are, enhancing access and independence for blind and deaf citizens. And one of the great components of the Americans with Disabilities Act is that it encouraged and in some ways mandated, it was designed to ensure, that we would use technology to make sure that all of our disabled residents continue to receive the benefits of those new technologies. And today's agreement is a great example of that. We believe that it will have a positive impact in many ways, and surely is the beginning I hope of the increase in use of technologies for all disabled in Massachusetts.

I want to mention briefly and give credit to Congressman Markey for his tremendous work on his technology accessible in Washington. It is important, as I found in many areas, that we work at the state level and the federal level so that we can maximize our efforts, particularly in this area. So I congratulate Congressman Markey for his work and hope that you will acknowledge your support of that bill to him also.

I appreciate that you are with us today and what I would like to do right now is introduce for some remarks, first Janet LaBreck, who is the Commissioner of the Massachusetts Commission for the Blind.

Commissioner Jane LaBreck: Thank you Attorney General and thank you to WGBH and specifically thank you to the Attorney General's Office for working so collaboratively with the blind community to ensure that this type of an agreement would have come to a positive resolution, but also, it would be a decision that would enhance the lives of individuals who are blind.

Going to the movie theaters, everyone usually takes that activity for granted, because you can go and you can sit and enjoy the movies. For those individuals who are blind, being able to sit and interpret a movie sometimes is very difficult. This type of technology that is available now for us to be able to sit and interpret and enjoy a movie significantly enhances our ability to not only be in compliance with the ADA, but also be able to enjoy activities that are readily by anyone else in society.

So, we think that this agreement is significant. We're hoping this will help change the experience for individuals who are blind. I'm particularly excited about the possibility for children to be able to go and enjoy the many movies that are available and giving them that access to that technology and the ability to enjoy listening and interpreting the movies will be significant for them. I really do think that this signals an opportunity for us as well, individuals from the blind community, from the deaf community, and from the disability community at large to also partner with the movie industry, with the theaters, to not only provide this accessibility, but also help raise awareness and to increase the opportunity for positive relationships in the future working with the theaters here in Massachusetts, so congratulations to everyone, this is pretty historic, particularly because of the 20th anniversary of the ADA, so congratulations to everybody and we really do appreciate the fact that this decision was rendered and will anyone in the blind community, so thank you.

Attorney General Coakley: We had the great opportunity to work with Commissioner LaBreck on our agreement with Apple on the iTunes technology and we will continue that collaboration and also wearing a different hat as District Attorney had the great opportunity to work with Commissioner Reed as we found there were unique and unusual safety issues for young people, particularly young women, but boys and girls who were deaf and hearing impaired and we had the great opportunity to work with Commissioner Reed developing some safety programs and tips for children and their parents. And so it is now my pleasure to introduce Commissioner Reed, who is the Commissioner for the Mass. Commission for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing.

Commissioner Heidi Reed: On behalf of the Commission for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing, it's truly a pleasure to come here and recognize and congratulate the Attorney General's Office on working together to make today possible. Staff for the Commission for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing, the Department of Communication Access Training and Technology, have worked together to provide resources and information and we're really thrilled to see that this is happening. It's an example of the great response that we can get when we work together and what's possible in Massachusetts.

For people who are deaf and hard of hearing, we know that the experience of going to see a movie in the theater is really a significant part of social and educational, and economic, and cultural experience of life in Massachusetts and all over the U.S. The opportunities that we have now is just opening a wide the movie theaters for our children, for young people, for people working and senior citizens, people of all ages with hearing loss to be able to fully benefit from the movie theater experience. It's really a tremendous opportunity.

We know that the Americans with Disabilities Act supports communication access as a civil right for people who are deaf and hard of hearing, so today is an important milestone and it's opening a door for us to be able to go to a movie theater more frequently and fully benefit from the experience. We're really excited about that opportunity to go to the movie theater with our family, our friends, our co-workers and our neighbors. So thank you to all of you for working together to make this possible and happen today, it's a wonderful example of success when we work together and what an appropriate way to celebrate the 20th anniversary of the Americans with Disabilities Act.

Attorney General Coakley: And it is also now my pleasure to introduce Kim Charlson who is the Director of the Perkins Brail and Talking Book Library at the Perkins School for the Blind, where all they can see is possibilities.

Kim Charlson, Director of the Perkins Braille & Talking Book Library: Thank you everyone for being here today and especially I want to express thanks to Attorney General Coakley and to Adam Hollingsworth, for all of the work that he and his team put into this agreement. This is truly a landmark agreement and on behalf of the Perkins School for the Blind, I'm speaking today for Stephen Rothstein, the President who was unable to come, I want to say how much and how pleased we are that this agreement has come to reality for blind and visually impaired people in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. It's really a groundbreaking agreement all across the country and I'm sure that people all across the country will be looking at it very carefully over the next few months as really showing leadership on this issue. Also, I want to thank WGBH, neighbors to the Perkins School for the Blind, for the work and commitment to media access that they have demonstrated over the years.

In my role in the Brail and Talking Book Library at Perkins I had the honor 22 year ago, before I was the Director, but working at Perkins to work with a team of people who had the vision at WGBH to believe that television could be accessible for people who are blind and visually impaired. As you can imagine, a lot of people in the television industry thought that WGBH had stepped off a ledge on the whole issue of accessible television for the blind, but the determination and dedication of the staff at WGBH really convinced the industry that it was possible to make television accessible.

I was part of a team that brought a television set into a room with about 25 blind people in it in 1988 and WGBH told us that we 'd be watching an accessible television show. Most of us didn't believe it. We couldn't understand how we could watch an accessible television program. We'd never seen audio description or heard audio description on television. Thirty minutes later when the program ended, there was silence in the room. Twenty blind people were just absolutely stunned that the show was over and we actually understood what had happened! It was amazing. Everybody was speechless, because we knew that we had just experienced something that was going to be groundbreaking, that there would be accessibility sometime in our lifetime for movies and for television. And this week has been particularly eventful with the passage of H.R.3101, Ed Markey's bill in Congress and with this event today.

The Perkins School for the Blind works with children and this access to audio description for movies is going to be so pivotal. When I was 11 years old, I lost my vision due to glaucoma and before that time I used to enjoy going to the movies with my family. After I couldn't see the screen anymore I was often frustrated and confused when we'd go to a movie as a family because I couldn't follow what was going on. Now, they tried to whisper in my ear, many of you have probably had that experience and people around us would say, *shhhhhhhh, shhhhhhhh, shhhhhhhh*, you're making too much noise and would get very annoyed at my parents, so they stopped doing it, and I stopped going to the movies in the movie theater. It wasn't until WGBH and the MoPix technology came about that I actually went to an audio described movie. And I said 'this is wonderful, now I understand what my colleagues are talking about.'

Can you imagine if kids today hadn't had the opportunity to go to an audio described showing of Harry Potter, what they would miss? Because Harry Potter is an icon of teenage technology and literature now and if you don't know about Harry Potter, you're just not in the know. So, WGBH and all of the partners have made a huge difference in making this happen today. Without this agreement we wouldn't be in this position where people who are blind and visually impaired will have choice, and choice is so important for our community to be able to actually get to a movie theater and watch a program and watch a movie. Sixty-three locations, where now we only have 14; people will be able to get to a movie theater in their community. The next step, and I hope that Martha and her team will be able to help us with this is that now that we'll have theater access, we need to have access to these same movies on DVDs with the motion picture industry, so I hope that maybe we can use your leverage Martha to get the motion picture industry to put audio description on these first run movies when they are released on DVD for future access to those who are blind and visually impaired.

Attorney General Coakley: Kim, we're starting on that this afternoon.

Kim Charlson: I'm glad to hear that. So, again, thank you to everyone involved, there's a lot of, a lot of people in this room had a lot to do with it, but it's certainly a pleasure to be a part of such an event today, and thank you so much.

Attorney General Coakley: An now it's my pleasure to introduce Larry Goldberg who is the Director of Media Access, the Media Access Group here at WGBH, and he is going to show you how the magic happens. We're going to take one minute because we're going to move down to the seats in front so that we can see.

Larry Goldberg, Director of Media Access, WGBH: While we're changing seats a little bit, I think a few of us choked up a bit from Kim's remarks, that was pretty amazing to hear. I'll give you a little background on how we got here today, and I have to say first of all, we're really honored to have the Attorney General and her staff, the Commissioners, and Kim Charlson with us here at WGBH, it's a great, great day for us. As our president John Abbot mentioned WGBH has a proud history in providing solutions to overcoming barriers to media and technology for people with disabilities and

that work is only possible because of this phenomenal staff that we have in our Media Access group and our National Center for Accessible Media who work really hard to overcome many barriers everyday to try to bring these technology solutions to the world.

We started out captioning Julia Child's French Chef, open captioning that in the early '70s, and then closed captioning in 1980 with PBS, CBS, and many TV shows. In 1993, with funding from the corporation for public broadcasting we created the National Center for Accessible Media, to do some research and development, to take these technologies to new venues. We're now called the Carl and Ruth Shapiro Family National Center for Accessible Media, in honor of our great funder that we have now. But we're also stretching our wings out to the world of the web and DVDs, as Kim mentioned, in flight technology, mobile technology, all of these should be accessible to as many people as possible, and that really is our mission, online education and of course the movies, and that's why we're here today, one of the oldest technologies in this country and something we began working on in the early '90s. We had a very small grant from the federal government to try to figure out a solution to providing captions to deaf people in movie theaters in a way that was unobtrusive to hearing people, and it was an interesting challenge for us.

We immediately invited folks from the National Association of Theater Owners, The Motion Picture Association, and consumers to help us figure out what the best design would be. The design guidance we received told us the technology would have to be inexpensive, elegant, simple, low tech, not prone to theft, not prone to breakage, easy for user to operate, easier for the theater to train their people to use, we really took the guidance from industry and consumers together to figure out what would really work for people in a movie theater and to that of course we added our descriptive video as well.

The TV studios, rather the movie studios have been tremendously supportive since day one, helping us on the content side of things as well as the exhibitors, figuring out how to get this in the theaters themselves. We're now working on completing standards for digital cinema you may know that many theaters are converting to digital cinema. The systems you'll see today work in analogue or digital and the technology will be even better and cheaper when everyone is in the digital realm.

We got very early and interesting support, tremendous support from General Cinema, a theater chain that was here in Massachusetts, which since has become AMC. And they worked tremendously in bringing us to where we are today. So let's get ready for the demonstration. Here's how it works.

We receive an early version of first run feature films before they run or they get into the theater either here in Boston or mostly in our Burbank operation. Our caption and description teams take that copy protected version of the film, which are heavily secured so that they don't get out of our shop, and they begin creating the caption and description files. We prepare caption data files and recorded narrations of our description scripts, and many of you haven't heard description before, you will in a minute. They actually write descriptions of visual elements for films and interweave them in the dialogue of

films, very unobtrusively and quite artfully. These caption and audio data files are then put either on an access CD for an analogue theater or become part of the digital cinema package for digital cinemas. These files are then sent to the theater on time for use on the day and date a film opens. And rarely is there an exception that these films are not accessible from the day that anyone can see them from the premier. The caption data is then displayed on the LED data way in sync with that film, as you see in the back of the theater today or available are the headsets for the audio for the blind people, usually infrared or FM headsets.

Today you will see an example of Rear Window captioning, there are other systems coming on to the market very soon, especially with the significance of today's announcement, but there will be other ways to watch the captions. This is our baby, this is what we'll be showing you today. Those of you who are sitting in a seat with a reflector, you can adjust it now so that you can read the captions that are up on the test message up on the screen. The reflectors on the seats today are clamped to the seats because we don't allow cup holders in this theater, but you probably know movie theaters enjoy having cup holders and so those reflectors have these rubber pucks that fit in the cup holder. And so if you have a reflector, adjust it now try to get the image on the reflector and perhaps fall to the lower part of the screen so you can adjust it however you want no matter where you are in the theater. The description today will be pumped right through the main speakers because we didn't have enough headsets for everyone, so you'll hear description on this clip from the movie *Up*, right in the audio that everybody hears, but normally the extra descriptions are just in the headsets for blind and visually impaired people.

We'll give you a couple of minutes to check out this clip and then we'll bring the lights back up and we'll take some questions. So, enjoy a little bit of the movie *Up*.

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